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# THE MUSICAL TIMES, And Singing Class Circular.

DECEMBER 1st, 1850.

## CATHEDRAL MUSIC AND COMPOSERS.

No. VIII.

*Contributed by E. HOLMES, Author of the "Life of Mozart."*

It is rather creditable to English art, that there is not any composer, whose works, after the lapse of a century and a half, connect themselves with the present era of music, and answer so completely to the ideal standard of beauty erected by the classic moderns, as those of Purcell. All other masters taste more or less of their age; but there is a multitude of phrases and passages in this author, which we will venture to say that the critic to whom they are strange would be unable to date, or to characterize in any other terms than those which describe fine music in its present highest acceptance. Instead of lamenting that Mozart and Beethoven never heard a note of Purcell, we have the more pleasure in tracing their parallelisms of thought and feeling; since, while it elevates the English master, it leaves their honor untouched.\*

It is our object in the present paper to indicate a few of the characteristics of Purcell's style, which excite surprise by their fulness of all the elements of modern effect, making him still active in the ranks of interesting composers, and showing how he lived in the futurity of his art. A funeral anthem preserved in the choir-books of York Minster, which we never heard, will serve in illustration of our topic. This is the remarkable opening:—

Man that is  
Man Man  
born of a wo-man  
that is born  
that is born of a wo-man

Conceive the ceremonial in the cathedral choir,

\* Purcell is mentioned by Handel's friend Mattheson in his work, "the complete Chapel Master." This writer, however, pretends that Purcell was a Frenchman, M. Pourcelle. Mattheson, who had the opportunity of communicating many important facts concerning the music of his day, is so careless, foppish, and affected a writer, that we must needs look on this as a poor joke.

and such a strain as this, slow and soft, stealing upon the ear, and it will be allowed that a more solemn and striking manner of commencing a funeral composition was never imagined. The beginning at the top, leaving in uncertainty the key, which evades the ear four times as the voices successively enter, and which is still kept in suspense until the B natural in the bass decides it, is a stroke of art calculated to raise the sense of mystery and solemnity in the hearer to the highest pitch. After the diminished seventh on the B natural in the bass, what feeling is displayed in the passing notes of the alto and treble to the cadence. That Beethoven would have admired and enjoyed such an opening as this may be proved from identical combinations in his own works. In the "*Qui tollis*" of the Mass in C, at the words *miserere nobis* the reader may perceive this same interval—E flat, in the upper part, against B natural, in the bass, made the salient feature of a sublime crescendo, in which the wild despairing cry for mercy is a noble extravagance of poetical conception.

The verse, "Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts," exemplifies, also, the most modern and elegant position of chords, with a boldness in the modulation which has been scarcely ever equalled. Beginning in C minor, we find ourselves in eight bars on the dominant of D minor, and yet the imitations in this passage of condensed harmony are perfectly natural. Every note in Gluck's forcible phrase "draws blood." The treble point of imitation is introduced exquisitely on a chord of the second:—

Shut not thy mer-ci-ful

and then, having dwelt long in minor keys, and amidst diminished intervals, Purcell prepares to console the ear by a full close in the major, which is brought about by this melodious passage of the tenor, introduced after one bar of silence, to give it effect. The treble and alto sustain the harmonies indicated by the figured bass:—

Shut not thy mer-ci-ful ears un-to our pray'rs.

4 b7 6 7 4 5 7 8

The cathedral funeral service, in London, has long degenerated into a routine. One brief but memorable contribution to it, by Purcell, "Thou knowest, Lord," is in constant use. No obsequies,

however noble or pathetic the associations raised, could be more fitly celebrated than by such appealing and expressive music as that from which we have quoted. While in Mozart's and Cherubini's requiem we enjoy the "luxury of woe," and find a melancholy pleasure in contemplating the last sad pageant of mortality, a cathedral funeral anthem, beautiful as its words generally are, is scarcely named in musical society but to be avoided. Let us hope that at Exeter Hall, or at Mr. Hullah's performances, the omissions of our cathedrals will be supplied.

To set particular words and expressions, rather than to generalise the meaning of the text of a composition, is esteemed by the moderns a pedantic fault. Purcell and Handel were often led on in their compositions by words. Purcell's musical imagination seems to have lighted up at any picturesque expression or affecting image. We find many examples of his sensibility to such impressions in this funeral anthem. "He cometh up and is cut down," suggests a movement upward and downward of parts; "bitter pains" are expressed in a series of chromatic discords; "to fall away from thee" introduces a succession of falls in the several voices. But if this were a commonplace mechanical artifice we should soon find it out.

The secret by which men of genius produce such diversity in unity in their prolific course of composition has excited much speculation. Haydn is said to have founded each of his symphonies on some story. Whatever may be the source of the inspiration, we are not bound to call it in question so long as the ideas which flow from it are natural and beautiful.

Purcell's musical imagination was so all-absorbing, that he absolutely could not read words without their instantly translating themselves into the language of his own art. Thus, in the anthem, "They that go down to the sea," he has expressed the word "*stagger* like a drunken man" by a jerk in the melody, and has been censured for this as if he intended to be ludicrous. He has certainly heightened the force of the image, and given the correct prosody and emphasis of the word "*stagger*;" but the blame of levity would more properly be attributed to the associations of the hearer than to any exaggeration either in the music or in the simile of the text.

A very interesting specimen of Purcell's *modern* style may be culled from the second movement of this anthem—the duet, "So when they cry." The storm is over, and the calm is expressed by a holding note of the alto, which, having come to its cadence, the bass continues and finishes the period. This mode of protracting a close, and of making a new feature burst in upon the cadence of an old one, is characteristic of Mozart, Haydn,

and Beethoven. But we will have Purcell's musical expression of stillness—

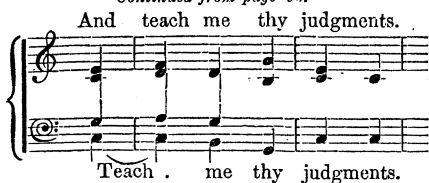


How naturally and poetically this *decrescendo* and the pauses in the bass voice paint the subsiding waves it is unnecessary to say; but surely at the theatre, within the last twenty years, we have heard similar terminations to scenes, with the voice part changed for a horn solo, and instead of the bass voice the orchestra; and all this by composers who never dreamed that the first inventor of the cadence was a young man in the time of Charles II.

The last result of musical experience, and a distinction, consequently, which the moderns have almost engrossed in profiting by the errors of their predecessors, is exhibited in the finished design of works; a process by which one movement is not only heightened in effect through favourable contrast with what has preceded, but the whole rendered free from redundancy. Purcell, in his foresight in this respect, eminently belongs to the modern era of composition. Take, as examples of composition without a note too much, the anthems, "O give thanks;" "Thy word is a lantern;" "O God, thou hast cast us out;" and among his dramatic compositions, *Dido and Æneas*, and *King Arthur*. How many more productions might be added to the list, we will merely suggest as a profitable inquiry to the reader who has leisure to pursue it.

Some musicians sit down to write a quartet, and by mistake compose a symphony; they want the power to control themselves and adjust their ideas to the occasion. Purcell possessed as absolute a command of his genius as Mozart. He knew equally well how to preserve a middle flight and how to soar. When he adopts a sweet and amiable vein it is as impossible to surpass him, as when in his most poetic altitudes—a *Te Deum*, for instance—he wields the thunders of the empyrean. The sweet expression of the trio at the end of the verse "Let the free-will offerings," on the words, "And teach me thy judgments," will be remembered by most musical readers. This melody which captivates by the elegance of its falls of a fifth—a Mozartean interval—has another trait of the same composer in the harmonizing, which we can never hear without wondering how Purcell found it. It is a suspension of the second in the bass, so vocal and expressive, that it seems to require the bow of a Dragonetti to do it justice.

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This elegant suspension in the bass was grateful to the ears of Mozart, and he has illustrated it to perfection in the beautiful duet with which his Opera of *Figaro* opens. Figaro measures his apartment while a perfect feast of these suspensions is served up in the orchestra.

Purcell employs the chord  $\frac{7}{4}$  on the dominant so frequently as to show it to be one of his favorite combinations. In any position this is a welcome chord. Beethoven likes the fourth in the middle part and the seventh above: Purcell places the fourth above and the seventh below. It is this harmony which pleases the hearer so much in the famous Round of the first act of *Fidelio*. Much habit and a long and various employment of the same combination is necessary before a composer identifies any one chord with himself. Mozart, for example, who has made such repeated use of the dominant seventh and flat ninth, in bringing about the return of his subjects from remote keys to the original one, may justly claim a sort of property in that chord. But it had been employed at least a hundred and twenty years before in the works of Matthew Lock. There are progressions of harmony in the English Madrigal writers of such modern elegance, as to surprise that having been once heard they should not have permanently affected the whole style of composition; yet these beauties of a certain age expired like flickering lights in an atmosphere not duly prepared for them. The glories of early English art are not so much those of science as of feeling and imagination; our composers discovered and experimented, but they saw but dimly into all the purposes of which their own harmonies were susceptible. But considering that almost the beginning of what we now term our English music—the air, the dramatic scene, the recitative—was the work of the 17th century, we may admire the enthusiasm and the energy with which our early composers rushed from the commencement to the conclusion of their art, occupying, in their noble anticipations, places in which we still view them with respect.

As a concluding instance of the modern art of Purcell, we intended to select some passages from the death-song of the queen in *Dido and Æneas*, a short, impassioned, and melancholy air, which though upon a ground bass, flows so naturally and attains so high a style of the pathetic, that the hearer is not sensible of the least restraint in its construction. But the whole is much involved; and instead of making any selection of its phrases,

we must be content to refer to it in the clear and elegant publication of the Musical Antiquarian Society. Besides, as this opera is to be performed in the course of the series of Mr. Hullah's Monthly Concerts, now commenced at St. Martin's Hall, there will be an opportunity for many to test in a careful execution of the work what has been here advanced.

That Purcell should choose to illustrate so poetical a subject as Dido in her "swan-like end, dying in music," on a succession of bass notes may seem strange. But whoever looks closely into this short phrase of chromatic bass notes, and at the bold suspensions, discords, and *appoggiature* which appear in the violin and tenor parts, while the voice part is thrown out in perfect freedom in all the exclamations of passion or tenderness which the scene requires, will admit that this short air could scarcely have been so well set on any other plan. All great musicians have had pleasure in setting themselves difficult tasks for the mere pleasure of overcoming them. Beethoven displayed this very remarkably, when having listened to a new quintet of Steibelt, and being solicited to play, he took up the bass part of the quintet he had heard, and turning it upside down, hammered a theme out of it, on which he played so well that the mortified author was obliged to leave the room.

The ground-bass is no formality of English growth, it came to us from Italy, and was extremely useful in improving music by exercising the melodious invention of composers, and in developing that variety in unity which is the source of our constant pleasure in the art. In the musical duels which used formerly to take place between players—a ground affording them an opportunity alternately to make variations upon it—the one who first gave in was of course vanquished. Paganini, who reproduced many of the ancient practices of the art—as the shake without a return, &c.—is the last performer who exhibited in public extempore variations on similar successions of harmonies akin to the old ground bass.

Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven varied a theme in all the parts with fancy and elegance which will never again be equalled. Variations like theirs have improved music and had their day. It is gratifying, amidst the constant transitions of the art, to be able to return to certain things which genius has rendered indestructible.

(To be continued.)

#### COMMEMORATION OF THE ORGANISTS OF ST. GEORGE'S CHAPEL, WINDSOR,

Took place on the 13th, in the Chapel Royal, and excited great interest in the musical world. The idea of a meeting of the members of different choirs in St. George's Chapel, originated, we believe, with Dr. Elvey, the organist; and the pieces selected for exe-